

Every Road Leads To An End by orphan_account

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Summary:

“Nance, I told him. I told them and they -,” he cuts himself off because he can feel the tears welling in his eyes and he’s managed to avoid those all night. No fucking way he’s starting now.

Or: Mike comes out.

Every Road Leads To An End

Author's Note:

slightly cleaned up from the original version i posted on tumblr a couple weeks ago.

title selfishly yanked from sufjan stevens' "death without dignity".

Mike's hands are shaking as he reaches for the phone on the corner of his desk - a hand-me-down he'd nabbed from Nancy's room when she'd packed all of her things and headed off to college two summers ago. He nearly knocks the entire thing to the floor in his haste to grab it.

"Get a grip, Wheeler," he mumbles out loud to himself, but he can't quite stop the tremor from coursing through him - it's the adrenaline, maybe. Probably not fear. Definitely anger.

Mike shakes his head and pulls out a piece of crumpled paper from his desk drawer, taking his time to punch the neatly-written numbers into the keypad on the phone. It rings once, twice, three times.

"Hello?" a tired but familiar voice responds from the other end. Mike can hear shuffling in the background, papers and books being shifted. He's momentarily overcome with such a strong sense of relief that his voice stupidly chokes up in his throat and he forgets to respond.

"Hello?" the voice asks again - soft, feminine, just slightly annoyed.

"Nancy," Mike finally manages to force out. "It's me. It's Mike."

"Mike? Hi."

She sounds confused. And why wouldn't she be? It's - Mike glances at the clock on his bedside table - 9:47 PM on a Sunday evening in mid-December and it's been more than two months since the last time Mike had called her. She's probably up studying for her finals, or Mike hopes she is at least. He's overcome with a sudden, sickening wave of guilt.

“Did I wake you?” he asks.

Nancy sighs softly into the receiver.

“No, Mike, you didn’t wake me,” she replies. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Mike pauses again, because he doesn’t really know how to answer that. Is he okay? Well, yeah. All of his limbs are in tact. Nothing hurts, at least physically. He’s locked away in his room, alone. Away from everyone else. His heart’s still beating.

So yeah. He’s okay in the way he was okay two years ago when El had sat him down and told him she thought they’d be better off as friends. He’s okay in the way that it hadn’t been a surprise to him even as a fumbling, scared 14 year old - not the breakup, and not what El had said to him right before she’d left (“I think there’s someone you like a little bit more than you like me.”).

He’s okay in the way that his life isn’t over and the world isn’t ending and no one has been harmed, save for his pride and maybe his heart.

“No,” he says finally, just as Nancy starts to ask if he’s still there. He continues talking before she can ask why.

“Nance, I told him. I told them and they -,” he cuts himself off because he can feel the tears welling in his eyes and he’s managed to avoid those all night. No fucking way he’s starting now.

Nancy’s breathing picks up and Mike almost feels as though the uptick in her pulse has manifested itself in his own, his heart beating in triplicate time, visible through the thin skin of his neck.

“You told them what, Mike?”

She doesn’t ask who “them” is. She already knows the answer to the question. Mike can hear it in her voice. He forces himself to tell her anyway, because she needs to hear it. Because he needs to say it out loud, to make it feel real.

“I told,” Mike’s voice cracks over his words and he swallows harshly, his free hand balling into a fist. When he starts up again, his voice is

louder than he'd intended it to be, but surer - stronger in his resolve. "I told mom and dad about me. I told them I'm...that I'm not fucking *normal*. That I like boys. That I'm dating Will."

And shit. That's the hard part. That's the *worst* part - is that Mike had looked his parents square in the eyes and told them that Will Byers was his boyfriend, had told them that Joyce Byers has known for *months* and it's about time he told the two of them. And he'd gotten nothing but a stony look of absolute repulsion in return.

"I always knew what they said about the Byers boy," Ted had uttered out, voice uncharacteristically harsh where usually Mike would find glaring indifference. "But you, Michael? You're not like him. You won't be like him. Not under my roof."

And that was when Mike had turned to his mom, his eyes glazing over with anger at the way his dad had described Will - like he was something gross, something to be *ashamed* of - but all he'd found was her worried eyes darting between Ted and Mike with terrified unease.

"Mom, *please*," Mike pleaded, sounding suddenly younger than his 16 years.

But Karen couldn't manage anything other than *Michael, I can't*, with tears brimming in her eyes. And that's when Mike had stormed up to his room, the sounds of his dad telling him to *think about what he's just said if he wants a place in this family* drifting up behind him and spinning through his head for hours as he shook alone on his bedroom floor. Until he'd picked up the phone. Until he'd dug Nancy's phone number out of the mess of his desk drawer. Until now.

"Oh, Mike," Nancy sighs out softly, and Mike can just imagine her face - brows pinched together in worry, lip caught between her teeth, short, neat fingernails worrying at the hair that's fallen into her face because she's gone about two months too long without a haircut.

"You should have waited -,"

Mike makes a noise and cuts her off, angry.

"Until when?" he asks, voice echoing against the walls of his bedroom. "Until the end of high school? Until I graduate college? Until dad's on his fucking deathbed, so the last thing he'll remember about me is how much of a disappointment I am to him?"

There's a stunned silence on the other end until Nancy takes a deep breath.

"Until next week," she corrects him softly. "When I'll be home for winter break. Until I could be there with you."

Mike is so stunned by the words that something catches at the back of his throat and he's overcome with the sudden urge to buy the first plane ticket to Chicago just so he can spend the night on Nancy's studio apartment floor and have her watch over him like she always used to, though she spent many years pretending she didn't care.

"I miss you," he says with such sudden, fierce honesty that a blush overtakes his face despite himself.

Nancy laughs, humorless and tired, on the other end of the line.

"I miss you too, Mike," she says. "Can you - can you get out? Maybe stay at Will's for a while?"

Mike hates that he doesn't even have to describe to her how terribly the whole thing had gone down for her to know he no longer feels comfortable under the roof of the house he's grown up in.

"I think - yeah. I'll go over to Will's and stay there. Just for a little while. Just until -," he doesn't say *until mom and dad stop hating me* because he's not sure when that will be. "U-until you're back home, maybe."

"That's a good idea, Mike," Nancy says. Her voice is steady, calming, but Mike can hear the vague quiver just beneath the timbre of it.

He keeps her on the phone for another twenty minutes, talking a little about classes and friends and the upcoming holidays, but mostly just listening to her scribbling away in her notebook while she studies, and pretending he's there with her - far, far away from home.

When he finally creeps downstairs with a backpack full of clothes and toiletries slung over his shoulder, he's not expecting to find his mom sitting in the dark at the kitchen table, wine glass in hand and hair tied up in a messy bun. Her face is red, eyes puffy like she hasn't stopped crying for hours. Oh.

"Michael," she says softly, startling him just as he's reaching for the front door.

"Mom," he says, voice mirroring hers, falling out of his mouth like a blunted whisper. She stands up and walks over to him, and Mike is suddenly struck by how much taller he is than her, how he towers over her. But somehow she's still looking at him like he's 12 years old again and it makes him feel small, shrunken inside himself.

"Please don't," she says, and it's not a full thought. She reaches for Mike's hands and grasps them with her own, holding on tightly like she's too afraid to let go.

"Mom, I have to leave," he says. "You heard dad. I can't be *like that* - I can't be *me* for as long as I live here. You have to let me go."

A tear slips out of her eye before she can blink it back.

"Maybe you don't have to be like that, Mike. Maybe you could just date a nice girl again. Maybe it doesn't have to be like this."

For the second time that night, Mike can feel his heart shriveling in his chest - betrayed, broken - and he pulls his hands out of his mom's grasp, stumbles backwards with the force he's used to do it.

"I can't," his voice is lost, airy. He feels like he's floating somewhere on the ceiling and watching himself stare at his mom with wide, disbelieving eyes. "I love him, mom. I can't be what you want me to be."

He leaves before she can say anything else.

By the time he makes it to the Byers' house, riding a bike that he outgrew three years ago, it's well past 11:00 but Mike can see a light on in the living room. He takes his chances and knocks on the front

door with frozen-cold hands because he doesn't know what else to do. Doesn't know where else to go.

It's Joyce that answers the door, all big, concerned eyes and soft voice as she says, "Mike? What are you doing here, sweetheart?"

And maybe it's the term of endearment (*sweetheart* - something his own mom has called him dozens of times). Maybe it's the look on her face. Or maybe it's just that it's Sunday evening and Mike should be tucked up in his bed with a comic book but instead he's standing on the Byers' front porch with the freezing bite of winter catching on all of his exposed parts - his cheeks, his hands, his heart. Maybe it's all of those things, along with other things that Mike can't find the words to identify, but all he knows is that something in his chest breaks itself wide open, like his insides are suddenly on display for all the world to see. And, before he can stop it from happening, a flood of tears falls down his cheeks, his body wracking itself with angry, broken sobs on the front porch of the Byers home as a full moon sits brightly in the sky overhead. He tries to speak but all that comes out is a wet cough, another fragmented whimper.

Joyce moves quickly to get Mike inside and onto the couch, her soft, gentle voice imploring him to tell her what's wrong as she rubs a soothing hand over his back. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Mike knows he's being too loud. Knows that he's likely woken Will from his slumber in the small house. Knows that he shouldn't be crying right now - not when he'd managed to last the *whole damn night* without shedding a single tear about it. But here he is. Crying on Joyce's shoulder and, eventually, managing to tell her the story in bits and pieces that make him feel sicker and sicker with each new recollection.

Joyce shushes him as his sobs die down to dry hiccups and he's finally cried enough that now all he feels is embarrassment in place of the sadness he'd felt only moments before.

"You can stay here for as long as you need," Joyce says, voice earnest and eyes sincere. She's holding onto Mike's hands and he doesn't pull back like he had with his own mom.

"Thank you," he whispers, because a whisper is all he can manage.

She lets him hug her for what feels like an eternity and Mike has never been more grateful for anything in his life.

He sleeps fitfully on the Byers' couch and wakes up to the bright early morning sun in his eyes and Will's soft hand pushing the hair back from his forehead.

"Hey," Mike greets him with a smile. The first genuine smile he's had in what feels like days. It's a foreign thing on his face - straining, almost, in its unfamiliarity. Seeing Will's face, feeling the warmth of him as he stands just over Mike from his place on the couch, settles the nerves in the pit of Mike's stomach just enough that he feels like he can manage.

"Hi," Will says. His face is worried, bottom lip bitten between his teeth and eyebrows drawn down in concern. "My mom told me what happened. Why didn't you wake me up last night?"

Mike laughs despite himself and pulls Will down by his arm until he's close enough to press a kiss to his forehead.

"You needed your sleep," Mike says. Something peaceful settles its way into his chest, the longer he looks up into Will's eyes. "Plus, I think your mom had it handled. Can she just adopt me already?"

Will snorts out a laugh and pokes Mike in the shoulder, though his face is still pinched with worry.

"That might be a little weird," he replies.

Mike hums out his agreement. He knows he must look tired, haggard, every insecurity written across the bags beneath his sad eyes and the lines between his brows. He manages another smile anyway.

"Guess I'll just have to marry into the family, then."

Will doesn't respond but his cheeks go pink as Mike leans up to hug him with soft, sweet intention.

He's got so much running through the back of his mind - his parents could hate him forever; he could be out of a home; is he wrong for

falling in love with the beautiful boy with the soft voice and kind eyes and loving smile? - but for just a moment, with Will's arms wrapped around him in the early hours of a cold December morning, he feels like maybe he's okay. He feels like maybe he's enough.

Author's Note:

comments/kudos appreciated :')